## Helena Independent Record May 10, 2001

## State decides to push for more arsenic testing at Deer Lodge Park

By ERIN P. BILLINGS IR State Bureau

HELENA — Possible rsenic contamination at a ublic park in Deer Lodge ould present enough health isks to evolve into wide-pread poisoning akin to sbestos exposure from a forter vermiculite mine near ibby, the state's chief doctor aid Wednesday.

Dr. Michael Spence, chief redical examiner for Monma, told a meeting of state ealth and environmental offilals that if action isn't taken on at Arrow Stone Park there ould be long-term carcinoenic effects on local residents.

"Basically, this is Libby in 380," said Spence.

Spence joined about a dozen ate officials Wednesday to scuss the situation at the eer Lodge park to figure out hat role they can play in procting the public from possic arsenic exposure. Arrow one Park is near where soil sting was conducted several ears ago by the Atlantic ichfield Co. on arsenic, a cantral causing substance.

Spence feared the Deer idge park could be a similar ruation to that in Libby, the

dreds of local residents have suffered or died from asbestos-related illness. Federal officials now are trying to clean up the human and environmental damages from the mine, which closed in 1990.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) have been at odds over whether additional testing at the Deer Lodge park should be conducted and if so what levels of arsenic should be deemed too dangerous for recreational use. In a September 2000 letter to ATSDR. county commissioners withdrew a request for further soil sampling at the site until the two federal agencies agree on a consistent approach to assess the risks to the public.

Powell County health officer, Dr. Kathleen Evans, asked the state last month to get involved after more than a year of inaction by local officials.

Director of the Montana
Department of Environmental
Quality Jan Sensibaugh recommended Wednesday she
and state Health Department
Director Gail Gray write
county commissioners to urge
them to allow the additional
soil testing to take place as
suggested by the federal

health agency. Also, Sensibaugh said she would press the EPA to approve additional testing and agreed to try and weigh in on local efforts to educate the community about the dangers of arsenic.

"Let's see if we can't get something done," Sensibaugh said.

EPA scientist in Helena Scott Brown said throughout the 1990s testing on the soil has been conducted and shown minimal arsenic risk for recreational users in the area. He said those tests give a clear representation of the arsenic risk at Arrow Stone Park, which is probably less threatening because of the work done there to make it a public use area.

"The question is why would Arrow Stone Park be unique and different from the other 42 miles of the floodplain," said Brown.

Brown said the recreational standard for arsenic is 1,600 parts per million, while the average arsenic found in the floodplain is between 100-300 parts per million. He added that less than 3 percent is considered a hot spot or an area where the arsenic levels creep to high levels.

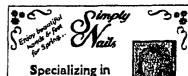
Chairwoman of the Powell Commission Kay Beck didn't return phone calls Wednesday.

Officials also batted about the idea of moving ahead to put up warning signs in the area, but were unclear about whether they had the authority to do so. They said they were concerned that if nothing is done to at least warn the community about the possible threat of arsenic poisoning, children's lives would be at risk

Todd Damrow, state epidemiologist, said disagreements between the EPA and the health agency must be put aside in "the name of children." Damrow added later that until action is taken, officials are "gambling" with kids' lives.

"Can we turn our back or close our eyes to that?" he asked. "What's going to happen years from now?"

Asked Ken Pekoc, spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services: "Why does EPA not want to err on the side of caution?"



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## Powell County health officer seeks help posting arsenic warning signs



BY ERICKA SCHENCK SMITH of The Standard State Bureau

HELENA — After more than a year of inaction by local officials, Powell County health officer Dr. Kathleen Evans has turned to the state for help in putting up signs warning of arsenic-contaminated soil at several popular recreation areas along the Clark Fork River, including Arrow Stone

ARSENIC levels at Arrow Stone Park in Put Motor. Deer Lodge are believed to be a health risk.

Park in Deer Lodge.

Evans said she is merely following the recommendations of the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which has released new reports saying it still believes the signs are necessary. The agency also continues to disagree with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency findings that the areas are safe for recreation.

In an April 21 letter to the directors of the departments of Environmental Quality and Public Health and Human Services,

See ARSENIC, Page A7

## Arsenic ...

Continued from Page Al

Evans formally requested help making and erecting the signs.

"Please help ensure that the tragedies of other preventable hazardous exposures, such as in Libby, are not repeated in our Montana community," she wrote, referring to the asbestosrelated health crisis in Libby. On Tuesday, Evans said the Issue is also likely to come up during Thursday's quarterly . meeting of the Powell County Public Health Board. She is a member of the board, as are the county commissioners. Some predicted the commissioners will refuse to post the areas, or to clean them up or ask for further testing.

"If they say that, then I'm

going to say, 'I can't be party to this any more," Evans said in a telephone interview. "This has been known as a potential problem and has been questioned for years."

County Commissioner Kay Beck said she had yet not heard that the ATSDR reports or Evans' request for warning signs would be on the agenda.

Ron Hanson, a contracted planner for the county, said the county is simply waiting for the two federal agencies to work together before making any decisions.

"We had requested that ATSDR and EPA get on the same page, so to speak," Hanson said, "We did not feel it was beneficial to the residents of this county, or any other area for that matter, to hear one thing from one federal agency and another thing from another federal agency.

... That's all we ask. We didn't want to be bothered in the meantime."

In a September 2000 letter to the ATSDR, the commissioners withdrew a request for further soil sampling "unless or until you and EPA agree on a consistent approach to assessing risks to the people who use Arrow Stone Park."

Hanson said it is simply too difficult to decide whom to believe about how much risk is acceptable. And, he added, the arsenic in the soil the result of a long history of mining in the area — isn't a serious concern for many people in Deer Lodge.

"Keep in mind the residents of the area have lived here generation after generation," he said. "They have lived with the river in a much more contaminated situation than it's in today."